
Administration Accomplishments Serving Veterans

February 1999

Veterans Health Care

Budget

- On October 21, 1998, VA's 1999 budget was signed into law. The Department received its largest budget increase since FY 1993 — \$1.6 billion above FY 1998 appropriations, for a total of \$42.6 billion.
- On February 1, 1999, the President submitted his FY 2000 budget to Congress which would provide \$44 billion in funding for VA.
- VA has been transformed from a hospital-based system to an ambulatory/outpatient system with approximately 1,100 sites where health care is delivered to veterans. Since 1994, VA has expanded its system to include more than 600 ambulatory and community-based clinics.
- As a result of VA's transformation over the past four years, the number of patients treated increased by more than 18-20 percent per year; inpatient bed days of care dropped by more than 60 percent; and outpatient visits have risen by more than 35 percent annually while staffing decreased by 11 percent.
- On October 1, 1998, VA launched a new health-care benefits plan for veterans. It provides for easier access to a broader array of services at VA facilities throughout the United States as well as in Puerto Rico. By the end of 1998, more than three million veterans had enrolled in the VA health-care system. The new plan permits VA to provide a continuum of health care to veterans, better assess demand for services, and manage its resources to deliver care in the most appropriate setting.
- VA has shown dramatic improvements in the quality of patient care in recent years, in a number of areas outperforming the private sector. VA also convened the public-private National Patient Safety Partnership with other health-care organizations.
- VA launched several initiatives in the area of hepatitis C, an emerging public health issue. VA established two centers of excellence, in Miami and San Francisco, for research and treatment of hepatitis C.
- With about 36 percent of the total veteran population 65 years old or older (compared with 13 percent of the general population), long term care is a critical issue for America's veterans. VA is intensifying its strategy development for providing long term care for elderly veterans; in the meantime, all currently available long term care beds will remain open to serve veterans.
- VA more than tripled the number of medical centers with Department of Defense (DOD) managed-care support contracts (TriCare) since 1996 (from 15 to 52).

Veterans Benefits

- Since 1995, VA has reduced its overall benefits staff by 2,200 employees (16 percent), but has increased the number of adjudication officers (individuals who process claims). By the year 2002, VA will have more than 6,000 adjudication officers — more than half of its total benefits division's work force.

- In 1998, VA announced the restoration of Dependency and Indemnity Compensation (DIC) benefits to certain spouses of deceased veterans who lost the survivor benefits when they remarried, but who are no longer married.

- In 1998, VA reached a new high in the percentage of benefits payments processed by Electronic Funds Transfer (EFT). Of the \$1.7 billion in compensation and pension benefits paid monthly, more than 76 percent are through EFT, far surpassing the federal government average of 65 percent.

- The Montgomery GI Bill education assistance benefits were increased by 20 percent. There also were increases for specially adapted housing, automobiles and adaptive equipment, and aid and attendance rates for veterans eligible for pension benefits.

- The President signed into law a provision to extend VA's authority to provide priority health care to Gulf War veterans through 2001. VA has contracted with the National Academy of Sciences to review and evaluate available scientific evidence to determine whether there is an association between illnesses Gulf War veterans are experiencing and their service in that war.

- The President created a Military and Veterans Health Coordinating Board to improve collaboration between VA, Department of Defense, and the Department of Health and Human Services on a wide range of health care and research issues relating to past, present and future service in the Armed Forces.

- The federal research commitment of VA and other departments on Gulf veterans' health issues has now reached \$115 million cumulatively in support of 121 research projects.

- VA established environmental research centers at three VA medical centers to explore the health effects of possibly toxic exposures on Gulf War veterans. The centers supplement other extensive VA research into the possible health effects of Gulf War service. Another center has been established to research the reproductive risks of military service, including Gulf War.

- The President urged passage of unprecedented legislation (now law) to permit VA to pay compensation benefits to chronically disabled Gulf War veterans with undiagnosed illnesses. VA extended the manifestation period for undiagnosed illnesses through December 31, 2001.

Gulf War Veterans Assistance

Gulf War Veterans Assistance (cont'd)

Environmental Issues

- VA established a special Gulf War Information Hotline (1-800-PGW-VETS), a Gulf War Review newsletter and town hall meetings to enhance communications with Gulf War veterans. Gulf War veterans may also find information through a Gulf War Veterans' Illnesses page on VA's World Wide Web site at <http://www.va.gov/gulf.htm>.

- The Administration issued decisions that VA would award disability payments, on the presumption of exposure to Agent Orange or other herbicides, to Vietnam veterans suffering from respiratory cancers, multiple myeloma, Hodgkin's disease, the liver disorder porphyria cutanea tarda, prostate cancer, and acute and subacute peripheral neuropathy.

- VA began providing compensation, health-care and vocational training to Vietnam veterans' children who suffer from spina bifida. Health care is provided by the Shriners Hospitals for Children through an agreement with VA.

Women Veterans Care

- VA established the Center for Women Veterans (CWV) to assess and improve VA's delivery of services to women veterans. The CWV participates in and promotes improvements to women veterans' programs by integrating clinical care, education outreach and research on women veterans-related issues.

- VA established:
 - Eight comprehensive women veterans' health centers;
 - Four stress-disorder treatment centers for women veterans;
 - A national counseling program at VA medical centers and readjustment counseling, or Vet Centers, across the country for sexual trauma victims;
 - Policies assuring availability of gender-specific care, including mammography screening, at all VA health-care facilities;
 - A Women Veterans' Division at VA's National Center for Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder in Boston, Massachusetts; and
 - Collaborative relationships with other federal agencies to assure women veterans' issues are incorporated into the national agenda on women. These relationships include: the Department of Health and Human Services Office of Womens' Health; Department of Defense Advisory Committee on Women in the Service and Council on Crime Victims Assistance Program; and the Department of Justice Violence Against Women Task Force.

Homeless Veterans Assistance

- There are few more compelling images than the fact that the Nation's defenders make up one third of America's homeless population. Recent research indicates that for Americans under the age of 35, the risk of becoming homeless is three times greater if you are a veteran. VA is the only federal agency providing direct, hands-on assistance to the homeless.

- In FY 99, VA will spend more than \$100 million in support of its homeless initiatives, and will fund an additional \$5 million in direct grants to homeless programs in communities across the nation. Over the past five years, the direct grants program has provided more than \$26 million for community-based activities to help homeless veterans.

Minority Veterans/ Minority Business

- VA maintains collaborative relationships with the Bureau of Indian Affairs, Department of Labor, Department of Defense and Public Health Service to ensure minority veterans' issues are properly addressed by federal agencies.
- VA's 18-member Advisory Committee on Minority Veterans issued three annual reports containing recommendations based on its evaluation of the effectiveness of VA programs and services in meeting the needs of minority veterans.
- The VA Center for Minority Veterans conducted more than 40 town hall forums across the country, giving veterans a chance to share their concerns and have agency officials available to address them.
- VA signed an agreement with the Navajo Nation to open a Vet Center on the reservation to provide counseling to Navajo veterans with post-traumatic stress disorder. Plans are being formulated to open three additional one-stop Vet Centers on other Indian reservations. VA and the Oneida Nation signed an historic agreement for the Oneida Health Clinic to provide medical services to veterans precluding them from traveling long distances to obtain care from a VA facility.
- VA translates the annual "Federal Benefits for Veterans and Dependents" handbook into Spanish and posts it on the VA home page on the World Wide Web (www.va.gov/pubaff/fedben/spfedben.pdf).
- VA increased by 83 percent the dollar value of contracts awarded to minority-owned small businesses since 1993.
- VA's highly decentralized structure (second only to Defense in the number of facilities) creates significant opportunities for small and disadvantaged businesses. VA is the only federal agency to establish procurement goals for contract awards to veteran-owned businesses and spent \$179 million with those firms in FY 1998.

Employment

- The Administration, through the direct funding efforts and assistance of the Department of Labor, has helped an estimated 500,000 veterans find jobs.
- A joint effort by the Departments of Defense, Labor and Veterans Affairs provided job assistance to 130,000 special disabled veterans.
- The President signed the Veterans Employment Opportunity Act which preserves veterans preference for federal jobs.

National Cemeteries/ Burials

- In FY 1998, approximately 550,000 veterans died, nearly 1,500 each day. The National Cemetery Administration (NCA) estimates that the annual number of veterans' deaths will continue to climb for the next decade, with the number of interments in VA national cemeteries increasing to more than 104,000 by the year 2008.

National Cemeteries/ Burials (cont'd)

- NCA is managing a 15 percent increase in workload while increasing staffing by only three percent.
- NCA will open four new national cemeteries in 1999: Dallas-Ft. Worth National Cemetery in Texas; Saratoga National Cemetery in New York; Abraham Lincoln National Cemetery near Chicago, Illinois; and Cleveland National Cemetery in Ohio. These additions will increase the number of national cemeteries to 119, with more than 13,200 acres and 3.1 million projected grave sites.
- The State Cemetery Grants program allows VA to fund construction of state veterans cemeteries, which complement VA national cemeteries. In FY 1998, grants totaling more than \$6 million were awarded.
- In 1998, VA and DOD hosted the Military Funeral Honors Executive Roundtable to look at options and identify ways to improve the availability of military honors at veterans' funerals. Legislation mandates that DOD ensure that three-person honor guards are available on request at all veterans' funerals, effective January 1, 2000.

Electronic Information Access/Year 2000

- In addition to making a vast array of VA information available to the public on the VA Internet site, VA now answers veterans' questions electronically on the federal government's first interactive customer service page (www.va.gov/customer/consumer.htm).
- VA reported to the Office of Management and Budget that 99.7 percent of its mission critical computer software applications are Year 2000 compliant, including all payment-related applications and applications supporting health care. As a safety measure, VA arranged for paper copies of benefits checks produced for the first two months of the year 2000 to be prepared in the event of computer problems in the banking industry.
- VA, in conjunction with the Department of Health and Human Services, established an on-line data base to provide health care providers and patients with timely information about the potential effects of year 2000 date changes on specific biomedical equipment. VA has also taken the lead in National Patient Safety Partnership efforts to increase awareness of the need for appropriate measures to alleviate potential risks.

President Clinton

- On Veterans Day 1998 at Arlington National Cemetery, President Clinton spoke movingly about the debt we owe our nation's veterans. He said: **"Every day, some of us have the privilege to see these silent white rows inscribed with their crosses and crescents and stars of David to remind us that our achievements in peace are built on the sacrifices of our veterans in war, and that we owe the most solemn debt to these brave Americans who knew their duty and did it so very well. We come together today to acknowledge that debt to them; a duty to provide for our veterans and their families, to give them every possible opportunity to improve their education; to find a job; to buy a home; to protect their health."**